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THE BATAVIA PLAN OF WEEK-DAY RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION

H. C. STORM

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At our last teachers' meeting I asked our teachers the reason for the great interest in week-day religious instruction. I told them that I was receiving letters from all over the country making inquiries about the Batavia plan. Interest seems to have sprung up all at once. The teachers suggested that this great interest is due to the general moral let-down all over the country. They said that there is no question about the existence of such a moral let-down and that everyone interested in the betterment of young people is casting about for some means to counteract this moral decline.

Since we had so many inquiries it was decided to publish a brief account of our Batavia plan of week-day religious instruction. Briefly stated, the Batavia plan consists in allowing the children to go to whatever church they choose for a quarter of a day each week for religious instruction. There is no compulsion about this. Those children who do not go to the church remain in school and spend the time in supervised study and in project work.

The history of the movement here is briefly this. About four years ago, shortly before the United States entered the war, the Board of Education of Batavia was waited upon by a delegation of six ministers. These ministers requested the Board to dismiss the pupils for religious instruction for one hour and a quarter each week. The Board agreed to the scheme and asked the Superintendent to arrange the school program so as to make room for this work. Then the excitement of the war came on. Two of the leading ministers were called into the service, everybody was engaged in war work, and the matter was dropped till after the signing of the armistice. But at the opening of school in the fall of the year 1919-20 we started the work in earnest.

Each child was handed a card which read as follows:

TO THE SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS:

Please permit my child.....
to attend the church indicated by (X) below for one hour each week.

() Brethren	() Swedish Methodist Episcopal
() Holy Cross Roman Catholic	(to attend First M.E.)
() Congregational	() Swedish Evangelical Mission
() Episcopal	() German Evangelical
() First Methodist Episcopal	() Baptist
() Immanuel German Lutheran	() Study hour (in case no church
() Bethany Swedish Lutheran	is selected)

Date..... 19.. Parent

The following statement appeared on the reverse side of the card:

TO THE PARENTS:

In accordance with the Batavia plan for week-day religious instruction, pupils in the elementary schools, on application of parents made on the other side of this card, will be permitted for one hour on Thursday to attend church for religious instruction.

If the privilege is abused for truancy or otherwise, it will be withdrawn. Pupils who remain in school will have a study hour.

H. C. STORM, *Superintendent*

This card was taken home, signed by the parent, and returned to the teacher. It was made very clear to each child that if his parents did not want him to go to any church he could remain in school.

After the teacher received all the cards she mailed the pastor of each church a list of students who were to report at his church on the following Thursday. She kept the cards on file in her desk as evidence that the parents were authorizing the excusing of the children. During this first year of our work, the year 1919-20, we enrolled 86 per cent of the grade children (this instruction is not given in high school) in week-day religious instruction. We started out with all of the churches in the town except two co-operating, and before many months had passed one of these two churches came in, so that before the end of the year all of the churches except one were taking part in the work.

You may ask whether we had any opposition to this work. We did not have very much, but we had some. One morning the County Superintendent of Schools walked into my office with a communication from the State's Attorney who had been visited by a delegation of people from Batavia. These people held that the movement was illegal. The State's Attorney assured them that he would investigate the matter and give them his decision. We gave a full description of the plan to the State's Attorney, showing him that the schools were not grading this religious instruction, that it was not a part of our school curriculum, and that we were simply excusing the children at the request of the parents, just as we would excuse a child for work, or to go on an errand, or for any other good reason. The State's Attorney, after receiving all the information, ruled that we were entirely within the law, and we heard nothing further from the opposition.

The work this year is being carried on just like it was last year, with somewhat increased interest and with a little larger percentage of enrolment, over 90 per cent of the grade children attending these classes.

We have been asked about the kind of religious instruction the children are getting in the churches. This is a vital question, and the ultimate success of week-day religious instruction will doubtless depend on the way the churches handle the matter. The curriculum varies considerably in the different churches. The Catholics give a great deal of church history and church doctrine, as do also the Episcopalians. The Lutherans deal with their catechism and Bible teaching. The English Methodist and Swedish Methodist and the Brethren churches are using the Gary plan. The Congregational and Baptist groups have their own printed courses. The Christian church and the Swedish Mission are making a specialty of the Old Testament. We have not visited all of the churches, and we do not know just how well the work is being adapted to the age and needs of the child. We feel that there is probably room for improvement in this regard, since many of the teachers have not recently made a study of methods of teaching and of child psychology.

We have frequently been asked also about the activities of those children who are not enrolled in the religious-instruction classes. All teachers and supervisors will understand that this is a rare opportunity for individual study on the part of those children who remain in school. The teacher allows them a great deal of freedom and they carry out many interesting projects. Some make studies of different kinds of wood in the locality. A few gather collections of rocks of Batavia and vicinity and make a special study of these. Others have made very attractive booklets on the birds of this region. Various other special studies are planned in accordance with the needs and interests of the pupils concerned.

Some of the advantages of such a plan of religious instruction are obvious. The boy looks upon Sunday school as a form of leisure occupation, a sort of pleasant pastime. He has not taken Sunday school seriously. This week-day religious instruction, coming during the school hours, appeals to the child as a business proposition. He expects to put some study upon this work, the same as he does upon his school work. He receives credit for the work on a report card issued by the church. He is marked on deportment and on industry, just as he is in school. He goes to church in his school clothes and is not on dress parade at all. The pastors and teachers who are in charge take the work more seriously than they do the Sunday school. Some pastors state that they spend much more time in preparation for these classes than they do for their sermons. This feature of focusing the eyes of the pastor on the children of his church is a strong argument for the movement.

One of the most frequent questions asked is whether the whole movement is worth while. We feel that it is. To be sure, we do not note any great change in the pupils thus far. One teacher notes the fact that the children still quarrel and fight at times. It is probable that we shall always have a certain amount of quarreling and fighting no matter how much religious and moral instruction we give; but we believe that there is an increased interest among the pupils in religious work and that the possibilities of this plan are large. We are all aware that many influences are at

work which tend to alienate our young people from the church. Doubtless the church has been more or less at fault, but most of us feel that young people are safer in the churches than they are in the pool halls. We feel that in spite of the weaknesses and shortcomings of the church it has been one of the most vital forces in the upbuilding of civilization and in the enriching of the lives of men. It is a real calamity to see large groups of our young people entirely uninterested in church work. The method followed by the churches in recent years has been to neglect the young people and allow them to drift away from the church and then try to win them back by revival meetings. This plan has failed miserably. If by our plan, or some better plan of week-day instruction, we can keep the children in the church, we shall not need the revival meeting to bring them back.

As employed in Batavia, the plan is not fully matured, and doubtless anyone visiting the instruction here could find certain weaknesses. But we believe that if the churches and the schools continue to co-operate in some such plan as this the moral tone and the ideals of our children and young people will be raised to a higher plane.